

Re-Writing the Plath Myth:  
Sylvia Plath and the Cult of Celebrity in Print Publication

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BA, University of Virginia, 2005

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia  
May, 2006 Degree

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~~Herbert Marcuse~~

Towards what [A. Alvarez] calls 'the Plath industry throbbing with busy-ness in the Universities,' and towards that 'vast potential audience,' I feel no obligations whatsoever. The scholars want the anatomy of the birth of the poetry; and the vast potential audience wants her blood, hair, touch, smell and a front seat in the kitchen where she died. The scholars may well inherit what they want, some day, and there are journalists supplying the other audience right now. But neither audience makes me feel she owes them anything.

- Ted Hughes, from *The Observer*, November 21, 1971

## **i. Introduction: Rewriting the Plath Myth**

When does an author become an icon? When does the cult of celebrity transform into myth?

If we had ever been in doubt of Sylvia Plath's rising currency as a pop culture icon, the 2003 film *Sylvia* starring Gwyneth Paltrow as the famed "poet/suicide" Sylvia Plath seals the deal. Uniting two already-famous faces and merging them into one, the film *Sylvia* (and the glut of promotional propaganda for the film still circulating in its wake) calls explicit attention to these relationships between author and celebrity, image and icon. "Does Paltrow look like Plath?" we might ask, or "How well does she play her?" Importantly, we are able to ask these questions of *Sylvia* because its subject has attained the status of a ubiquitous and immediately recognizable figure in American culture. A quick search for Plath on the online bookseller Amazon.com returns a listing of 374 books and 4 films, and these materials span the full gamut of genre, ranging from Plath's letters and journals to critical works and even biographies geared specifically towards teenage audiences. Likewise, these incarnations of Plath exist in a variety of media formats. Not only can we purchase works "by Plath," "of Plath<sup>1</sup>," and "about Plath" in print, but we can hear and see her through audio and video recordings of her poetry and witness fictional re-enactments of her life and creative works on film.

In this regard, the film *Sylvia* does not merely invoke our pre-existing cultural knowledge of Plath's likeness and her status within the canon of American literature. Advertisements for *Sylvia* emphasize the likeness between Paltrow and Plath: shot in a simple portrait style, the

film's ad campaign forces us to evaluate our pre-existing knowledge of what Sylvia Plath looked like in comparison to the actress who is playing her, while at the same time encouraging us to look closer for the inevitable differences. For indeed, the "Paltrow-as-Plath" hybrid brought to life by *Sylvia* epitomizes the growing visibility of the phenomenon I will refer to as "the Plath myth" – a constellation of textual fragments, personal histories, and Barthesian "myths" converging into a paradoxically singular idea of the "author," Sylvia Plath.

Before moving into a theoretical discussion of what it means to define Plath as "myth" and as an "author," however, I should first begin by pointing out that the proliferation of "the Plath myth" in our culture is not a unique phenomenon. In a similar study of Virginia Woolf, Brenda Silvers interrogates Woolf's importance to American and British iconography by analyzing the recognizability and market value of Woolf's name and face. In *Virginia Woolf: Icon*, Silvers begins by examining the impact of early works such as Edward Albee's 1962 play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and Woolf's rise to celebrity status in the receptive culture of America in the 1960's. Next, Silvers meticulously charts the filaments extending outwards from this decade, cataloguing Woolf's growing presence in advertising and underscoring her value as a marketable symbol. Finally, following up an extensive analysis of the many depictions of Woolf in pop art and photography, Silvers closes by drawing our attention to Woolf's "monstrous union" with Marilyn Monroe on a Chapel Hill, NC billboard in the late 1980's. Arguing that this collage represents a "high/low hybrid" that depicts both of its subjects as "boundary-haunting monsters," Silvers' conclusion prophesies Nicole Kidman's recent Oscar win as "Best Actress" for her eerie performance of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*.

While Silvers focuses her attention upon Woolf's iconography and her value as a marketable commodity, however, I will limit my inquiries to the proliferation of "the Plath myth" in print form, and more specifically, in the written text. Whereas much of Silvers' analysis hinges upon aesthetics and Barthesian ideas of "rhetoric of the image<sup>2</sup>," my discussion will be

framed by Barthes' conceptualization of "myth" as a "second-order semiological system" and "metalanguage," and grounded in ideas about "the author" as articulated by Foucault. Although the film *Sylvia* inspired my interest in the industry that drives celebrity and culture's construction of literary "myths," it also marks our first move *away* from the fascinating and complex history of the Plath myth in print publication. Quite simply, to examine Plath's recent ascent to "image" and "icon" would be to neglect the quieter rumblings of print culture that have haunted Plath scholars for 40 years – the infamy of Plath's suicide in conjunction to the *Ariel* manuscript, for example, or the tumult of her relationship (both literary and otherwise) with fellow poet Ted Hughes. Because so much of the Plath myth stems from relationships that were – and indeed, still are – utterly fixated on the importance of the written word, we must look first to the literary phase preceding *Sylvia* before embarking upon a quest to understand the Plath myth in iconography and film.

Let us begin, then, by asking what a "myth" is and how we are meant to understand it in relation to Sylvia Plath. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes begins by defining myth as "a system of communication," emphasizing the point that "myth" is not merely a single object or idea, but rather "a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes 1972, 110). Attributing an "imperative, buttonholing character" to myth, Barthes asserts: "Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form" (Barthes 1972, 126). Describing the comforting and "expansive ambiguity" of myth as a semiological system, Barthes claims that when we move from a semiological (comprehensive) level to an ideological (interpretive) one, we invest myths with our own reading of their essential function. To put things more bluntly, myths are both created and sustained by people and by culture. By "abolishing the complexity of human acts," myth gives human interactions "the simplicity of essences" and "organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident" (Barthes 1972,

143). Thus transforming culture into something natural and inevitable, myth “establishes a blissful clarity” because “things appear to mean something by themselves.”

Yet if myth is a system of signification that naturalizes social phenomena, then the myth of an “author” is not one myth but two. As Foucault argues in his essay “What is an Author,” the “paradoxical singularity of the name of an author” describes the myth in which an author’s name becomes representative of a volume of literary works as well as an *event* within the paradigm of discourse and culture (Foucault 122). This figure of an author is “a projection, a figure who is heavily invested with the reader’s fantasies, dreams, and desires,” and accordingly, the author and the work of art are both a symptom and a product of culture (Felski 63).

To contextualize Foucault’s essay even further, though, we must also understand his argument as a rebuttal to Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” as intended to urge readers to *re-define* their relationship with a text rather than simply proclaiming its author to be dead. According to Foucault, literature (or more generally speaking, “writing”) reflects a writer, a work of writing, and the world in which it was conceived, and *none* of these layers should be discarded. Thus noting the symbolic importance of writing’s link to “sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself” but denying that we must kill *all* ideas of authorship, Foucault muddies our understanding of “what constitutes a work of literature” by questioning: “If an individual is not an author, what are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others?” (Foucault 118). In short, if we are to agree with Foucault by perceiving literature and its (public) reception to be regulated by the culture and discourse in which they exist, it seems logical that we view “the author” and his/her acts of writing with similar flexibility.

Although Foucault moves away from ideas specifically pertaining to individual authorship in the remainder of his essay, his opening thoughts about “the author” neatly connect with our previous conceptualization of Barthesian myth. Just as the “author” and the “author-function” are “situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups

of discourse and their singular mode of existence,” the Plath myth exists within an entire lexicon of authorial myths: myths that coexist in culture; myths that collide through the vehicle of discourse (Foucault 125). When Foucault urges us to reconsider the subject, “to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies,” we should examine Plath’s mythology similarly, looking for intersections of these Plath myths within the matrix of print culture (Foucault 137). If we are to see the Plath myth as “a complex and variable function of discourse,” we must look not only to our popular conceptions of Plath, but to the different and conflicting myths of this author, to the strange and unlikely convergences between this myth and others (Foucault 138).

With these ideas in mind, my first chapter will make the following inquiry: How are we to understand the many permutations of “understanding” a single author through different periods of history, and how are we to appreciate the potential dangers and impact of controlling an authorial myth? In this chapter, I will examine the implications of “re-writing the Plath myth” and delineate the many attempts of those who lived within Plath’s inner circle to re-define her in print. By juxtaposing the introductions, forwards, and commentaries of Robert Lowell, Aurelia Schober Plath, Ted Hughes, and Frieda Hughes that (seemingly, as a rule) preface Plath’s works, I will interrogate the ways in which Plath’s surviving family and friends have shaded and even altered the public’s perception and circulation of the “Plath myth.” By discerning differences between these intimate yet equally “authentic” accounts, I will search for the political and personal undercurrents coursing beneath them, analyzing the effects of “revising” and “re-writing” Plath that reverberate through the forty years of print publication succeeding her death. Finally, I will return to Plath’s own writing, comparing others’ revisions of “Plath” to her own role as the *creator* of the Plath myth: to her acts of self-definition as an author; to her stirring self-portraits of persona and self.

In my second chapter, I will explore the recent trend of fictionalizing Plath in order to fill the inevitable gaps left in documentation and biography. These fictionalized accounts, a phenomenon that I will refer to as “Plath bio-fictions,” engage in the act of interpreting new factual information and testimonials about Plath while simultaneously borrowing from creative license to revive her psychic and emotional life in fiction. Published in quick succession soon after Ted Hughes’ death in 1998, these titles include: Emma Tennant’s *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001); Kate Moses’s *Wintering* (2003); and Robert Anderson’s *Little Fugue* (2005).

These Plath bio-fictions represent a new stage in re-writing the Plath myth. Borrowing from classical mythology in their depictions of Plath, they meld our previous ideas of the Plath myth with her own usage of and fascination with classical mythology in her poems. In this sense, these bio-fictions represent an intersection between three (Barthesian) myths: our myth of Plath (i.e., “the Plath myth”), Plath’s myth of herself (her poetic persona), and the much older myth of the tragic woman in classical mythology. Accordingly, in this chapter I will ask not only how, but also *why* these Plath bio-fictions hearken back to older archetypes of artistic production: the abandoned woman; the suicidal woman; the woman with a pen. What do these intersecting mythologies imply about our culture? Why fiction? Why classical mythology? Why Plath?

As one final note, I should make it clear that my arguments in both of these chapters will focus upon primary texts rather than working in direct dialogue with contemporary critical conversations about Plath’s life and poetry. In my first chapter, I will borrow from texts that claim authenticity (and thus authority) over Plath through their intimacy, and in my second chapter, I will utilize texts that claim imaginative authority over her life through fiction. Although Plath’s positioning at the cusp of 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave American feminism has made her a remarkably popular subject of “feminist” literary critiques, I will not undertake an analysis of the myth of Plath as a poet in the feminist tradition, or the myth of Plath as the subject of feminist critique. Instead, I would argue that we first must understand the Plath myth on some

fundamental level in its *own* complexity before (exponentially) complicating it by taking into account the equally complex phenomenon of American “feminism.”

To clarify, then: my project is not to perform a feminist reading or a critical study of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. My project is to study our ideas about “Sylvia Plath,” the author; to study the ways in which various texts *including* her poetry have spread several widely known myths and a state of cultish celebrity across America and the globe. By looking at Plath not from within her texts, but rather, from without them, we might discern an interlocking matrix of symbols and events as compelling as art itself: it is culture at work, an organic growth – the budding and then the flourishing of the Plath myth.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the peculiar subtitle of Kate Moses’ novel *Wintering*, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see Roland Barthes’ arguments about advertising, iconography, and semiological systems of signification in “Rhetoric of the Image” in *Image-Music-Text*.



She made a good go for a weeping willow  
Closed all the windows and made herself a pillow  
As her limbs clung to the ground  
She lay her head down

Her hair was dirty in February  
She was thirty in 1963  
A thousand seconds more  
On the oven door  
She took a long deep breath  
While her babies slept

Made a good go for a weeping willow.

- "Crackle and Drag," Paul Westerberg

### I. A Family Affair: The Plath Myth & the Inner Circle

At the time of her death on February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath was a literary unknown. The author of a single volume of poetry, *The Colossus*, and having recently published her novel *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas," in her lifetime Plath received equal if not greater notoriety as the cuckolded wife of Ted Hughes as she did for her writing. Yet in the years following her suicide, Plath's star ascended. Although the world first met Sylvia Plath through Ted Hughes – and more particularly, through his infamous hand in re-arranging the manuscript of her posthumously published volume of poetry, *Ariel* – in the poems written during the days and months following her separation from Hughes, Plath's voice hardens as it hits its stride. In *Ariel*, Plath emerges as a different poet from her previous work: she is more brutal, more fearless, more concise. The change in *Ariel* is almost palpable and questions resound: where did this change come from? What provoked this sudden metamorphosis? How did Ted Hughes' role in re-arranging, adding, and omitting poems from Plath's manuscript shape *Ariel*? How did Plath intend things to be?

In the years following Plath's death, this enigma of "the authorship of *Ariel*" has become increasingly important to our critical understanding of Sylvia Plath. Because conjecture and debate over Ted Hughes' role in shaping the "*Ariel* voice" have become a matter of public

contention<sup>1</sup>, critical conversations often either defend Hughes or openly disdain his actions as the executor of Plath's estate. Whereas biographers such as Diane Middlebrook have argued that Plath benefited from her close artistic partnership with Hughes, hinting that this relationship justified his rearrangements in *Ariel*<sup>2</sup>, other critics maintain that these alterations to the *Ariel* manuscript bastardized Plath's dying will and corrupted both her vision and artistic intent. Regardless, although Plath's list of publications has expanded since her death from two to 14 separate works – ranging from letters, journals, and children's stories to the 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Poems*<sup>3</sup> -- *Ariel* remains the flashpoint for our literary studies.

Critical discussions of *Ariel* have been shackled to the impact of its author's failing marriage and eventual suicide, however, as if this context influenced and indeed *created* the volume's intimate detail and "confessional" style of address. As a result, for those familiar with Plath's life, work, and mythology, "understanding Plath" has often boiled down to a choice between two camps: pro-Hughes or anti-Hughes; ignoring Hughes as the subject of many of *Ariel's* poems, or indicting him in it. Some biographers such as Janet Malcolm<sup>4</sup> even go so far as to insist that this choice is unavoidable. But how much of this is the cult of celebrity at work? How much of it is the Plath myth? Where, in this flurry of publications and the accompanying critical ruckus, do we find the "real" Sylvia Plath – and more importantly, should we be trying to?

Even critics such as Jacqueline Rose who have explicitly tried to avoid this trap of biographical interpretation have been cornered into litigation and forced to publicly address the relationship between Plath's art and the outside world. In a 2002 article chronicling her litigation with Ted Hughes and the Estate of Sylvia Plath, Rose returns to the opening line of her book, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, ruefully echoing the assertion, "This is not a biography." A decade since *Haunting* first appeared in print, Rose reflects upon her extended dispute with Ted Hughes over "the biography which [he] saw me as having written," concluding, "no writer has suffered as

much as Plath from the biographical imperative” (Rose 2002). While Rose strenuously lobbies for scholars to open Plath’s poetry up to new meanings rather than close them off within the bounds of what one is “permitted to say,” the conclusion to her essay seems nonetheless troublesome when it purposefully closes with a question rather than an assertion. What good does it do to ask any question we wish of Plath if we can no longer answer it?

It is tremendously difficult, of course, to ask how and why Ted Hughes has become so incorporated into our ideas of Plath, but it is even harder to eliminate him entirely from the conversation. With so much talk of Hughes, with so much value placed on the first-hand testimonials of family and friends and their accounts of Plath, it seems that we must return to a far more fundamental issue: how have first-hand testimonials of Plath affected and/or contributed to the Plath myth? Can these claims of “authenticity” – i.e., knowing the “real” Plath in person rather than knowing her through literature or reputation– refute this process of myth-making, or do these claims merely reinforce the Plath myth?

Despite the many differences that exist between Hughes’ 1965 arrangement of *Ariel* and the recent 2004 recuperation of Plath’s “restored” manuscript, no matter the edition one reads, there is a sense of paradox inherent to Plath’s poetry. Several representative themes characterize Plath’s poetic struggles within a “contracting” world of everyday limitations and an “expanding” world of suicidal nihilism. In both versions of *Ariel*, Plath represents her conflicted emotions by likening various objects to the sea, the stars, and mirrors through similes, metaphors, and vivid imagery. Fittingly enough, the coexistence of mutability and permanence within each of these elements recreates the very tension straining Plath’s own conflicted worldview: her overwhelming self-consciousness of the *impermanence* of human life as tempered by her equal desire to create something of permanence.

Yet the potentially misleading nature of all of these symbols is also an equally, if not more important, commonality between them; the *deceptive* calm of the sea, the stars, and mirrors

conceal the turmoil that churns beneath. And so, although Plath clearly, even blatantly represents disorder in the shocking language of poems like “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Cut,” we must ask whether these poems are truly more candid than their more subdued counterparts. Is the “grotesque” truly the way that Plath sees the world, or does it act instead as an elaborate subterfuge, a wound on the surface distracting our attention from a deeper hurt within? Perhaps there *is* an equal truth to be found in the sea, the sky, and the mirror image, in the things that are not quite as they seem. From the small detail always reversed, the miniscule something always wrong, we must conclude that although there is *always* something “wrong” in the poetry of Plath, what is wrong it is not always what we think.

We might use this sense of paradox so inherent to Plath’s poetry as a metaphor for the Plath myth itself. Just as family accounts strain to direct their memories of Plath inwards, arguing for an essentialist, authentic conception of Sylvia Plath, these accounts are also *intended* to reverberate outwards into the world of literature and culture. Accordingly, although the writings of Robert Lowell, Aurelia Schober Plath, Ted Hughes, and Frieda Hughes are doubtlessly founded in real experiences, situations, and events, we must also recognize that when they entered the symbolic realm of elegy and commemoration, they immediately became participants in this process of myth-making – and thus the paradox: they are both real and un-real, true and un-true. So perhaps it would be best to see Plath as a framed Picasso painting instead: through the grossly distorted, fragmented shapes on her canvas, she aims to reveal multiple perspectives of a single subject, much like a cubist painter. Yet we cannot see this painting without a frame – i.e., the accounts and critical authority of those who *knew* Plath. As strangers who did not witness her in real life, we must view her through the myths constructed by those who did.

By examining the published accounts and editorial authority exerted by those who lived within Plath’s inner circle, perhaps we will find an explanation as to why the stakes over controlling the Plath myth are so high. We might never know the reality that lies hidden in the

process of Sylvia Plath's creation of poetry, but by looking at the ways in which she has been *re-written*, we might debunk certain aspects of her mythology.

In his famous 1965 introduction to the American version of *Ariel*, Robert Lowell introduces us to Plath through a peculiar device: he knew Plath in person, he admits, yet did not *know* her at all<sup>5</sup>. For although Lowell claims Plath's acquaintance through her occasional attendance at his poetry seminar for Boston University, he admits that he "never guessed her later appalling and triumphant fulfillment" when viewing her early poems, and even goes so far as to concede, "Somehow none of it sank very deep into my awareness" (*Ariel* xvi). Yet despite these disavowals of intimacy, Lowell's characterization of Plath is nonetheless vivid, visceral, and as legendary and poetic as the woman he seeks to describe. In his introduction, Lowell argues that Plath "becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created" in *Ariel*. If we are to believe Lowell's account, Plath metamorphoses from a girlish "brilliant tense presence embarrassed by restraint" into "hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess,' but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines" before our eyes, springing forth from the pages of this volume as if from the head of Zeus (*Ariel* xiii).

Comparing Plath to "a Dido, Phaedra, or Medea," Lowell attributes the virtuosity and breadth of her poetic voice to a mythical force of talent, defining her artisanship as a form of heroism. Yet he also writes: "What is most heroic in her, though, is not her force, but the desperate practicality of her control, her hand on metal with its modest, womanish touch" (Lowell xiv). Importantly, then, although Lowell's account can explain (what he characterizes as) the sudden blossoming of Plath's poetry in *Ariel*, he can only do so in mythical terms. To understand both the tragedy and the talent possessed by Plath, Lowell transforms her into a "Dido:" a figure and a narrative implicitly and immediately understood, part of the mythology of

Western culture, further explanation unnecessary. Thus embedded into the narrative trope of the “tragic woman,” Plath becomes a myth within a myth – an always-already, an understood.

Once Plath has been embedded within this pre-existing narrative structure, Lowell continues on to imply that Plath’s suicide (or at the least the “death” of her poetic persona) was inevitable. While “nothing is too much for the macabre gaiety of her control,” Lowell claims: “it is too much; her art’s immortality is life’s disintegration.” Interpreting some of *Ariel*’s most resonant images—“the surprise, the shimmering, unwrapped birthday present, the transcendence ‘into the red eye, the cauldron of morning,’ and the lover”—as harbingers of “her own abrupt and defiant death,” Lowell indicates our implicit foreknowledge of Plath’s demise via myth (Lowell xiv). Denying that Plath’s poems could be seen as a “celebration of some savage and debauched existence,” he argues, “this poetry and life are not a career.” Rather, if we are to take Lowell at his word, Plath’s poetry tells us “that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it” (Lowell xv) – a resoundingly pessimistic reading at best. Accordingly, if we read *Ariel* in its prescribed order, chronologically and with Lowell’s preface first, it seems that we are doomed to meet with Plath’s “end” before we have even begun.

Yet if Plath’s talent is indeed akin to “a game of ‘chicken,’ the wheels of [two] cars locked and unable to swerve” as Lowell attests, it seems that we should ask who is at the wheel (Lowell xv). Although Lowell’s comparison between the tragic woman’s death-by-pyre and Plath’s death-by-oven seems a resonant parallel – particularly in context to Dido and Phaedra’s kindred roles as letter writers – this comparison strays from Plath’s own vision of herself. Whereas the tragic women Lowell cites compose their final letters before committing suicide, we should recall Plath’s *reincarnation* of self, post-suicide attempt, in the poem “Lady Lazarus.” In “Lady Lazarus,” Plath mocks her own failure to successfully commit suicide, likening herself to the Biblical figure Lazarus whom Jesus miraculously raised from the dead. Importantly, although Plath identifies with the deep grief, abandonment, and suicidal urges of the figures Lowell cites,

these sentiments do not represent the end of her poetry: ever expanding yet ever contracting, death represents the possibility of rebirthing the subject – and by association, so does poetry.

Undeniably, then, although Robert Lowell distances himself from Plath by qualifying his relationship with her and likening her to figures from classical myths, he nonetheless exercises a strong editorial authority over how we are to read Plath. We might see the editorial content of his introduction as akin to a teacher's endorsement of a former student's achievement: although Lowell is somewhat heavy-handed in his readings, he remains most interested in the process of writing itself. His interest in metamorphosis, for example, in Plath's transformation from student to "heroic poetess" reflects Lowell's own interest in the craft and construction of poetry, as well as in the artistic evolution of young writers. From his account, we might garner a perspective of a "developmental" stage in the Plath myth, predating the apex of her chronicled tragedy.

Whereas Lowell emphasizes Plath's progression as an artist, however, tying his first-hand observations of her personality and demeanor back to his readings of her poetry, Aurelia Schober Plath's extensive forward to *Letters Home* is rather different in comparison. While we might understand Lowell's interest in the Plath "metamorphosis" as a byproduct of his role as her teacher, Aurelia Plath's account emphasizes the closeness of her relationship with Plath while – much more importantly – preserving the Plath name. At the beginning of her introduction to *Letters*, Aurelia Plath claims: "Throughout her prose and poetry, Sylvia fused parts of my life with hers from time to time, and so I feel it is important to lead into an account of her early years by first describing the crucial decisions and ruling forces in my own life" (Letters 3). Using this comment as a cue to contextualize Plath's life by telling the extensive history of her own, Aurelia Plath subsequently provides her reader with a lengthy back story to her own childhood, adolescence, and relationship with Sylvia's father, Otto Plath. The baby Sylvia only enters this

history after we are halfway through. Nonetheless, despite Aurelia Plath's preoccupation with her own placement in the Plath family's history, it seems significant when she attests:

Between Sylvia and me there existed – as between my own mother and me – a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. Understanding this, I learned, as she grew older, not to refer to previous voluntary confidences on her part. (Letters 32)

This comment clearly exhibits some of the tension underscoring Sylvia's relationship with her mother. Although confidences were made, Aurelia Plath understood that these intimacies were not to be repeated. As a result, we might see this comment as a hint that *Letter's* focus on the Plath family history and Aurelia's own life is a result of her daughter's wishes, as well as in the interest of protecting the family name.

Throughout Aurelia Plath's introduction, this need to "maintain appearances" prevails. For example, when Plath recalls her daughter's romantic relationships "becoming strained" after she had won a prize or published a piece, she muses: "to outsiders it seemed as though she won so easily; they did not know what constant practice and effort it took" (Letters 38). Likewise, when Aurelia Plath recollects the firsthand experience of visiting Hughes and Plath during the period in which their marriage first began to unravel, she relates her observations in subtle terms: "After the first few days...I sensed a tension between Sylvia and Ted that troubled me" (Letters 458). Although Aurelia Plath reveals that at this point, Sylvia knew of Ted's affair with Assia Wevill and was "intensely jealous," she refrains from further comment; as in most of her account, we see little of the depths yet much of the surface.

Just as Aurelia Plath claims that her daughter attempted "to project the image of the 'all-around' person" by succeeding socially and academically at Smith College, *Letters* seems a euphemistic account of these internal pressures building. Even in her final note, a single sentence mourning her daughter's suicide, Aurelia Plath retains her tone of conventionality and restraint: "Her physical energies had been depleted by illness, anxiety and over-work, and although she had



for so long managed to be gallant and equal to the life-experience, some darker day than usual had temporarily made it seem impossible to pursue” (Letters 500). Although the sentiment is both heartfelt and elegiac, Plath’s language is remarkably subdued, even understated, and the choice of the word “equal” seems particularly indicative. Aurelia Plath’s introduction to *Letters* smoothes out the imperfections on the surface; hers is the task of keeping an even keel.

Clearly, Aurelia Schober Plath’s depictions of an equanimous and balanced “Sivvy” strongly contrast the myth of “Plath” that has been created by her daughter’s cutting (and often vitriolic) poetry. Likewise, in context of the many outbursts directed against Aurelia Schober Plath that appeared in the 1982 publication of Plath’s *Journals*, we must also question whether this equilibrium was the goal of mother or daughter. What are we to make of Schober’s “motherly” instincts as she continues to repackage the Plath myth into a more domestic, palatable form? Also noteworthy seems Aurelia Plath’s note of release *explaining* materials from her daughter’s psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Ruth Beuscher:

Much of the material in these pages relating to Sylvia Plath’s therapy is of course very painful to me, and coming to the decision to approve its release has been difficult. I have no doubt that many readers will accept whatever negative thoughts she reveals her and the whole and absolute truth, despite their cancellation on other, more positive pages. In any case, the importance of this material to Sylvia Plath’s work is certain, and in the interest of furthering understanding of her emotional situation, I have given my consent to the release of this material. (*Journals* 267)

Importantly, Aurelia Plath’s greatest consideration does not seem to be the actual violence of the sentiments that these materials reveal, but the manner in which the *public* might negatively perceive and use them. Without ever outwardly arguing that Plath was different in her private life than in her public persona, Aurelia Plath reiterates the importance of this divide throughout her account. In this regard, one might see her emphasis on family history and reputation, as well as the linear structuring of her account, as attempts to order the familial disorder and dysfunction of her daughter’s compositions.

While Aurelia Plath’s testimonies work through an implicit understanding of the authentic connection between “mother and daughter,” allowing Aurelia’s myths to work

discreetly rather than making an obvious grasp for control of the Plath legacy, Ted Hughes' accounts of Sylvia Plath are consistently the opposite. Hughes' introductory note to Aurelia Plath's release in the 1982 *Journals* exemplifies this as he echoes what we have already heard: "Sylvia often fused her life with her mother's. They had a symbiotic, deeply supportive union of great complexity in which it may not always have been easy to feel a separate person, an individual self." Yet whereas Aurelia Plath moved on from this point into matter of fact narrative of the Plath's family history, we should note the difference as Hughes launches into interpretation, even going so far as to claim (rather suspiciously in the third person), "After Sylvia's marriage, there was a similar dependency on her husband" (*Journals* 265). Plath's mother understates Plath's anxieties and breakdowns by describing them as "taxing," and in marked contrast, Hughes' accounts of Plath often seem hyperbolic in comparison.

In contrast to Aurelia Plath's "equal life experience," Hughes' accounts of Plath depict the terrors of a nightmarish and unstable psychological paradigm: "The constant struggle she had as an artist – to pass beyond the demons of fear and emptiness, to feel an authentic self, to reach her own power – required breaking out of the symbiosis, rejecting the amnesiac feeling of dissociated rage and thereby shattering the bell jar" (*Journals* 266). This comparison between Ted Hughes and Aurelia Schober Plath epitomizes the impact of family memoirs on the "Plath myth." As readers, we must choose one of these myths to be our Plath – the haunted woman or the balanced girl – or waffle between the two extremes.

Although Sylvia Plath's mother limits her "answer to the avalanche of [public] inquiries" to a single 40-page introduction to *Letters*, in the 1970s Hughes embarked upon a journey of "re-writing" the image of his former wife that was to continue for the rest of his life (*Letters* 3). Although supporters of Hughes' 1998 volume of poetry, *Birthday Letters*, describe it as "breaking a thirty year silence" about Plath, we should note Hughes's active role in shaping and contextualizing Plath's work from 1965 onward. In addition to re-arranging the *Ariel*

manuscript, Hughes edited and introduced Plath's 1982 *Journal* as well as the 1977 prose volume, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. In these publications, Hughes extensively addresses the work of Sylvia Plath and from these accounts – even without speaking directly about his marital relations – we might garner a great deal about Hughes' relationship with Plath and her art, and consequently, how he has affected the Plath myth.

Hughes begins his 1977 introduction to *Johnny Panic* with a terse and mysterious concession: "After *The Bell Jar* [Sylvia Plath] began another novel, provisionally titled *Double Exposure*, and had about 130 pages of it when she died. That manuscript has since disappeared." Also claiming that "some of [Plath's] material is unpublishable" in reference to her various writings about acquaintances made in Devon when the couple lived at Court Green, it seems strange that Hughes initiates his address to readers of Plath's journals by denying us further knowledge rather than ceding it (*Johnny Panic* 11). At the conclusion of this introductory essay, he writes:

The logical thing, no doubt, would be to publish this more private side of her journal complete. It seems probable that her real creation was her own image, so that all her writings appear like notes and jottings directing attention towards that central problem – herself. Where this is right or wrong, with some personalities it simply happens. As an editor of Sylvia Plath's unpublished writings, watching this happen to her, I am more and more inclined to think that any bit of evidence which corrects and clarifies our idea of what she really was is important, insofar as her writings persuade us of her importance. But living people figure everywhere even in her most private discussions with herself, an – an editor has to face it – some things are more important than revelations about writers. The vivid cruel words she could use to pin down her acquaintances and even her close friends were nothing she would want published and would be no joke to the recipients, still less so now that she is internationally famous and admired for her gift of phrase. This shouldn't need to be said. (*Johnny Panic* 19)

Yet although his introduction to *Johnny Panic* begins (and ends) with a terse and rather peculiar denial of further resources – including materials such as Plath’s last journals that belonged to Hughes and were sealed off from the public until the late 1990s – Hughes reveals himself as ready and willing to add to the tremendous volume of *interpretations* of Plath in a prolix and opinionated manner.

Hughes’s interpretative remarks in the introduction to *Johnny Panic* are a combination of memoir – i.e., recollections of living with and being married to Sylvia Plath– and literary criticism. For example, Hughes offers anecdotal insight into Plath’s aspirations: “Successful story writing, for [Plath], had all the advantages of a top job” because she wanted “cash,” professional standing, and the status of a “serious investigator into the real world” (*Johnny Panic* 13). Musing, “It is strange that she was so much more patient with her poems,” in this regard Hughes’ introduction reads like a memoir rather than an active interpretation of the volume’s contents: “She would sit down to compose poetry in a fever, like an addicted gambler, yet afterwards she would ponder over and correct the results that disappointed her—resigned, wistful, but loyal, even maternal” (*Johnny Panic* 15). Similar memories of Plath and her early efforts at writing dominate the beginning of this introduction, focusing on her behavior rather than the actual content or style of her poetry.

Despite Hughes’ vehement denials in *Johnny Panic* that Plath’s journals would ever appear for public consumption, by 1982 the impossible had occurred and a highly edited version of *Journals* appeared in print<sup>6</sup>. Once again the author of the preface to this work, Hughes returns to this poetic blend of criticism and memoir, now comparing “what was going on in [Plath] to a process of alchemy” (*Journals* xi). Whereas his previous analysis of Plath drew mostly from anecdotes and contemporary tropes of critical analysis, in this second introduction Hughes provides us with a far more impressionistic, personalized view of Plath. He asks:

But what did she want? In a different culture, perhaps, she would have been happier. There was something about her reminiscent of what one reads of Islamic fanatic lovers of God – a craving to strip away everything from some ultimate intensity, some communion with spirit, or with reality, or simply with intensity itself. (Journals xi)

Describing Plath's evolution from early poems into the "*Ariel* voice," he characterizes her desires as "violent," attributing the evolution of her poetry to "something very primitive, perhaps very female, a readiness, even a need, to sacrifice everything to the new verse" (Journals xi). Much like Robert Lowell's characterization of Plath through myth in his introduction to *Ariel*, Hughes implies that Plath's work in *Ariel* was akin to a literary metamorphosis.

Launching into one of his favorite topics, (what can be described as a combination of his belief in the pagan supernatural melded with metaphysics), Hughes argues that although "Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings," in *Ariel* "her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke" (Journals xii). In this depiction, Plath transcends the capabilities of the average person or even the average artist, and if we are to agree with Hughes, she breaks free from her "bundles of contradictory and complementary selves," discovering a "real self... dumb, shut away beneath the to-and-fro conflicting voices of the false and petty selves" and giving it voice (Journals xii). Yet if Hughes claims "the Sylvia Plath we can divine [*Ariel*] is the closest we get now to the real person in her daily life," we must nonetheless question his rationale for suppressing many of her manuscripts, "losing" the manuscript for a new novel, and even going so far as to admit to destroying Plath's last journal (Journals xiii). Much like Lowell's characterization of Plath as a "Dido" figure, Hughes' idea of the "dumb and voiceless inner self" seems a projection of his own beliefs about his former wife, which he then corroborates through his close association with her. Ironically, although Hughes proclaims *Ariel* as the "closest" we

can come to “real” Plath, he nonetheless attempts to coerce our ideas of Plath into accordance with *his* reading of the volume.

The recent publication of 2005’s *Ariel: The Restored Edition* reveals the mysteries of the original manuscript and ordering of *Ariel* and recruits a new generation into “re-writing Plath<sup>7</sup>.” In her introduction to the restored edition of *Ariel*, Frieda Hughes attempts to puzzle out the strange and often contradictory legacies passed on to her by her mother and father, both poets. Likewise, she must balance her relationships with her father and mother with an outside storm of cult and criticism. As Hughes puts it, “Since she died my mother has been dissected, analyzed, reinterpreted, reinvented, fictionalized, and in some cases completely fabricated” (Restored Ariel xx). She sees her role as gleaning truth from all of this mythology.

In many aspects, Frieda Hughes’s introduction aims to address many of the previous “Plath myths” that have developed over the past few decades and to debunk them. In Hughes’ arguments, there exists both a sense of elegy as well as fury – a fury provoked by the attempts of the reading public to re-embody Plath by recreating her mother in myth. As Hughes puts it, “It was as if the clay from her poetic energy was taken up and versions of my mother made out of it, invented to reflect only the inventors, as if they could possess my real, actual mother, now a woman who had ceased to resemble herself in those other minds” (Restored Ariel xvii). Objecting to “the wider vilification of my father,” she explains Hughes’ arrangement as an “effort to give the book a broader perspective in order to make it more acceptable to readers, rather than alienate them” and indicts readers for treating Hughes’ editorial decisions as an interference “with the sanctity of my mother’s suicide, as if, like some deity, everything associated with her must be enshrined and preserved as miraculous” (Restored Ariel xviii, xvi). Likewise, Hughes debunks the “other-worldly” and mythical language often used to describe the “*Ariel* voice,” as if it were a phenomenon that was not knowingly and artfully polished, but rather, born by Immaculate Conception. Hughes argues: “There was no lack of choice,” and he

cites poems written “towards the end of 1961” that possessed “an urgency, freedom, and force that was quite new in her work” (Restored Ariel xii). Although Plath only read *Ariel* as an adult, after beginning work on the “restored manuscript” as it neared publication, she demonstrates a familiarity with and, indeed, a shrewd understanding of her mother’s work that pinpoints both its merits and its weaknesses.

For the most part, Frieda Hughes urges readers to focus on her mother’s words rather than the popular mythology surrounding them. Recollecting readers’ outrage when a plaque commemorating Plath was placed at 3 Chalcot Square (the Hughes family’s former residence) instead of Fitzroy Road (the place of Plath’s death), Hughes writes: “I did not want my mother’s death to be commemorated as if it had won an award. I wanted her *life* to be celebrated, the fact that she had existed, lived to the fullness of her ability, been happy and sad, tormented and ecstatic, and given birth to my brother and me” (Restored Ariel xix). Repeatedly, she exhorts readers to return to Plath’s poetic articulations of self. Hughes posits that although “*Ariel*, her extraordinary achievement [was] poised as she was between her volatile emotional state and the edge of a precipice,” unlike Plath, “the art was not to fall” (Restored Ariel xx). In a stunning closure that struggles to balance both the impact of her father’s infidelity upon her mothers, as well as her mother’s final blow to her father, she concludes: “When [Plath] died leaving *Ariel* as her last book, she was caught in the act of revenge, in a voice that had been honed and practiced for years, latterly with the help of my father. Though he became a victim of it, ultimately he did not shy from its mastery” (Restored Ariel xx).

As illustrated by the colorful publication history of Plath – a history that continues on into present day – various testimonies have altered and attempted to control the vantage point from which we view Plath. In the case of Robert Lowell, it was the lens of mythology; in that of Aurelia Schober Plath, it was a matter of protecting the family name – a matter of confidentiality and restraint. In the case of Ted Hughes, things became more complicated, particularly given

the context of his dual role as husband and artist, and further entangled through his position as the executor of Hughes estate. Lastly, Frieda Hughes' introduction to *Ariel* attempts to debunk the Plath myth by drawing back to her poetry and away from the accounts of previous generations, arguing that Plath's "own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world and the manner in which she pinned down her subjects with a merciless eye" (Restored Ariel xx).

Which work are we to use as a touchstone for understanding Plath, though? The task proves rather troublesome if we compare the differences between the two *Ariels*. As revealed by *Ariel: Restored's* cover design, Plath experimented with several titles for the volume that we now so famously know, and at one point, she had posited this title to be named after the poem, "The Rabbit Catcher" – a poem removed from the volume by Hughes, only appearing later in 1982's *Collected Poems* and then reincorporated into *Ariel* in 2004. While Hughes justified many of his editorial decisions as the result of removing weaker poems to make room for newer poems that Plath had not intended for the volume, integrating gems such as "Sheep in Fog" that otherwise would not have appeared, the omission of "The Rabbit Catcher" seems nonetheless striking – and even more so when one considers Hughes' extensive litigation with Jacqueline Rose over her reading of the poem in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* and his repartee to Plath with his own "Rabbit Catcher" in the 1998 volume, *Birthday Letters*.

In Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher," we begin in a "place of force," thrust into the position of a hunted rabbit, terrified yet silenced, fleeing through a malignant natural world. In these opening stanza, Plath depicts an "extravagant," deadly terrain from which the only obvious refuge is the rabbit hole: feminized, "simmering, perfumed." Yet after the betrayal of this safe space, after the snare's brutal snap, in the fifth stanza Plath turns outward: we become aware of another subject, a "he" intoxicated by "little deaths," and in the sixth stanza, we learn that a relationship exists between the "he" and the speaker of the poem. In this turning outward, Plath



dramatizes the tension between inward and outward motion that courses throughout *Ariel*, a deeper vein. The snare becomes an instrument of this tightening, but paradoxically, as it closes the speaker's perspective expands outwards, towards epiphany: in this moment of "constriction" we see confrontation rather than flight.

But although the violent twists and turns of Plath's "Rabbit Catcher" seem remarkably fitting to the trajectory of *Ariel* as a whole, Hughes omits it and then makes it his own by including a poem similarly entitled "The Rabbit Catcher" in 1998's *Birthday Letters*. In Hughes' repartee to Plath's "Rabbit Catcher," we are positioned from the vantage point of a "he," frightened by a "she" that has spun out of control and into self-destructiveness. Whereas Plath uses hunting as a metaphor in her poem, representing the exciting brutality of romantic relationships and punning upon sexual imagery, Hughes literalizes the topic: hunting becomes the "he's" "heritage, hard-won concessions / From the hangings and the transportations /To live off the land" (Hughes 145). His speaker holds babies, tags along, and patiently waits for the female "thunderscape" to "come back to nature," yet he never attempts to understand the source of this rage. Quite passively, Hughes's poem witnesses the tempest without engaging the device of the trap. In this light, Hughes' closing line, "The poem, like smoking entrails, /Came soft into your hands" seems yet another "misunderstanding" or misinterpretation of the speaker in Plath's poem. Poetry was not merely the fruit, the form of Plath's art: it was also a process of logic – a logic that Hughes' poem either misunderstands or purposely ignores in its efforts to refute Plath's speaker.

The conversation between these poems is, of course, chilling: an argument continued on in poetry to the grave. Yet Hughes's removal of the poem from the original volume of *Ariel* as well as his repartee to Plath can be seen as one final point of corroboration that these first hand testimonials of Plath do, in fact, attempt to and effectively change our perceptions of the Plath myth. Given the fact that "The Rabbit Catcher" did not appear to the public eye until

almost 20 years after *Ariel* was written, how are we to know Plath other than via “myth” when those who control her work have so blatantly acted upon bias?

We find ourselves now at a fork in the road: purists would perhaps prefer to scorn the critical introductions by Hughes, Lowell, and Schober Plath; biased fans will pick their sides. Yet what if we are to accept this myth – accept it, with its many sides – but read each of these accounts in juxtaposition, both to each other and to Plath’s poetry? For although Plath’s cry peals out to the world as do “clear vowels,” reverberating into the endless beyond of the expanding universe, her words also resonate endlessly within us. She is both echo and elegy, expanding and contracting in breaths and in gasps, an inevitable and unavoidable confrontation of death’s shadow upon life. Just as Plath’s poetry faces the very ambivalence of life’s melancholy with extraordinary poise and braveness, through the many facets of the Plath myths we might mourn and celebrate the sorrow and the joy of the worlds within us.

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<sup>1</sup> Many (including Frieda Hughes) have commented about this term, the “Ariel voice,” noting the manner in which critics characterize it as an unexplainable phenomenon rather than a talent that Plath cultivated and worked to achieve.

<sup>2</sup> See Middlebrook’s lecture for Stanford University’s “Book Salon,” available online through Stanford University’s website.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, Plath was the first poet to posthumously win a Pulitzer Prize. Also striking, however, is the number of discrepancies existing between the listing of works “also by Sylvia Plath” in different publications: as time progresses, although Plath’s bibliography has consistently expanded, in many cases these lists seem motivated by bias or political aims. For example, although *Ariel: The Restored Edition* attributes two previously unmentioned children’s books to Plath, the “censored” version of her journals (as edited and published by Hughes in 1982) is suspiciously excluded from its list of publication, although the 2000 version of her “unabridged” journals appears. Yet, in *Unabridged Journals* we see the Hughes’ version listed in Plath’s bibliography and the differences between these manuscripts explained in a terse, factual tone.

<sup>4</sup> For more, see *The Silent Woman* (1994), Malcolm’s openly partisan study of Plath biography.

<sup>5</sup> Some argue that Lowell’s introduction depicts Plath as if “the poems killed her.” Tracy Brain asserts in *The Other Sylvia Plath*, “While I do not want to dwell on Plath’s life and death, it seems important to look

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skeptically at Lowell's influential view of her as an animal or superhuman death machine that produces bullets of words before inflicting them on herself" (Brain 6).

<sup>6</sup> A particularly good comparison of Hughes' editorial decisions regarding the *Journals* is the two versions of Plath's journal entry on May 19, 1958, chronicling a famous encounter soon after Plath attended Hughes' reading of *Oedipus* against his wishes. Hughes' edits range from repeatedly omitting Plath's trivial accusation that he was "a liar and a vain smiler," to removing her vitriolic (and potentially damaging) account of adultery in a friends' marriage, to some sexually charged and highly deprecating remarks about Hughes's "vanity" and suspected infidelity. (Journals 228; Uncensored Journals 386).

<sup>7</sup> Prior to the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Lynda K. Bundtzen extensively examines the textual disparities between Plath's manuscript and Hughes' arrangement of *Ariel* in her 2001 book, *The Other Ariel*. In her preface, she lists herself in "distinguished company" – citing Jacqueline Rose, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Anne Stevenson as authors who encountered similar difficulties receiving permission from the Hughes estate to publish their works.

“I wish I had a Sylvia Plath,  
Busted tooth and a smile,  
And cigarette ashes in her drink,  
The kind that goes out and then sleeps for a week,  
The kind that goes out on her,  
To give me a reason, for well, I dunno.”

-Ryan Adams, “Sylvia Plath”

## II. Imagining Interiority: the Plath Bio-Fiction

The most recent wave in the Plath myth has flowed quickly from the 1998 death of Ted Hughes with the force of a dam released rather than the slow pull of culture’s tide. In some regards, this flood of new information seems merely coincidental in its timing: for example, Hughes’ release of *Birthday Letters* and *Howls and Whispers* – both collections of poems that broke over thirty years of silence regarding his relationship to his former wife – seemed to appear just in the nick of time, only months preceding his death in October 1998. But when less than two years later in 2000, an even greater glimpse into the life of Sylvia Plath was revealed by the publication of her “uncensored” journals (edited by Karen Kukil) and a Plath archive founded at Emory University, it seemed that this “new openness” about Plath was here to stay. This string of creative and non-fictional publications served as a fitting harbinger for her growing visibility as a pop culture celebrity and literary icon, as our ideas of the Plath myth became increasingly expansive as well as increasingly specific. This new mythical Sylvia – and the strange vein in which a spate of “bio-fictions<sup>1</sup>” has proliferated – is that of a woman paradoxically “larger than life” yet pinned beneath the magnifying glass.

Strikingly, although Ted Hughes ceded us much of what we know first-hand about Sylvia Plath, he was also a culprit in the disappearance of the scraps she left behind: he admitted to destroying her last journal and likewise confessed that a novel manuscript had “disappeared.” Accordingly, in the wake of his 1998 death and the rash of publications that accompanied it, it seems that little hope can exist for further biographical information about Plath to appear. As

Sandra Gilbert argues, these gaps exemplify “a yawning gulf in records of Plath’s own sensibility – a gulf that can only be filled by conjecture or even fantasy, unless the missing manuscripts (including the allegedly destroyed journal) miraculously resurface” (Gilbert 1). Knowing more thus merely enhances our hunger for what we do not know, and in the face of these fissures in Plath documentation and biography, the Plath myth turned to fiction.

Soon after Ted Hughes died in 1998, a series of novels began to appear that fictionalized the psychic reality of the life and death of Sylvia Plath while at the same time drawing heavily from her work and biographical details. I will refer to these novels as “Plath bio-fictions,” as this factual base often lends them towards exerting some sort of interpretative, critical authority over the Plath myth. Perhaps this rash of bio-fictions could be attributed to a decreased fear of litigation; after all, with Ted Hughes dead, disputes over “interpretation” (such as Hughes’ decade-long spat with Jacqueline Rose, discussed in Chapter 1) would seem far less likely. Regardless, in 1999 a British writer named Emma Tennant published a book, *Burnt Diaries*, recounting her memories of her alleged affair with Ted Hughes throughout the 1970s, and only three years later, she published a second novel also pertaining to Plath. Focusing this time more specifically on the “love triangle” between Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Assia Wevill, Tennant entitled her second novel *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* for its British publication in 2001, and by the time the book moved to America in that same year, Tennant had shortened things to just *Sylvia and Ted*.

In 2003, a second Plath bio-fiction appeared, this time at the hand of Kate Moses, a first-time novelist and “serious” Plath scholar. Marketed as a “deeply-felt” and pseudo-academic venture, Moses’ *Wintering: a Novel of Sylvia Plath* draws extensively (and ostensibly) upon its author’s research into Plath, even going so far as to include an appendix of her documentation of sources and cite a grant from the Lilly Library specializing in Plath at Indiana University. Finally, in 2005, the last novel in this spate reached publication when Robert Anderson’s *Wintering*

appeared, projecting “Plath as inspiration” in postmodern style onto the canvas of American history from 1960 to the present. Whereas Moses and Tennant both focused primarily on the relationships between Plath, Hughes, and Wevill, however, Anderson departs from this archetype: his novel is about Plath’s impact on readers, about pop culture, and (rather strangely) about a self-titled character named Robert coming-of-age in New York City.

Despite the scope of their many differences – ranging from disparities in style to characterization and narrative structure – the three Plath “bio-fictions” published between 2001 and 2005 share a noticeable interest in classical mythology. Pirating from Plath’s own tendency towards using mythological figures as symbols in her poems, these novels abandon the “Plath myths” fostered by Plath’s inner circle and latch on to the classical myths that Plath herself preferred. In these novels, we return to an earlier mythology of the tragic and abandoned woman – Greek figures such as Arachne, Philomela, etc. – yet simultaneously witnessing a new incarnation of Plath via literary cannibalism.

Why utilize fictional devices to better understand Plath, we might ask? Importantly, whereas revisions of the Plath myth by Plath’s family and friends vary widely yet universally emphasize the authenticity of their accounts, bio-fictions engage in a different yet equally complex task in “re-writing the Plath myth.” While incorporating new biographical information into our ideas about the poet, these books draw on creative license to imaginatively fill in the gaps to her story. As a result, these bio-fictions can be said to represent three levels of “myth” that compound the act of “myth-making” with that of “myth-interpretation.”

To return to Foucault’s conceptualization of “the author” while at the same time reapplying Barthes’ ideas about embedded semiological systems, we might look to the shared strand of classical mythology running through these bio-fictions, and view this usage of classical mythology as a first level of myth-making in Plath bio-fictions. (In this sense, we are punning on the word “myth,” because we are using the word in both its classical/literal sense, as well as its

Barthesian/theoretical one). Moving outwards by one degree, the second level of myth in the Plath bio-fictions would be Plath's cultivation and appropriation of these myths to create the poetic persona of "Sylvia Plath," and then this third level of myth would be the Plath bio-fictions *mimicry* of these allusions to classical mythology in Plath's persona and poems. Ultimately, then, not only do the novels *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*, *Wintering*, and *Little Fugue* attempt to meld our modern ideas of "Sylvia Plath" into a single, holistic image from a plethora of conflicting non-fictional sources. They lionize Plath as both person and poetess, harnessing her to her own proclivity for classical mythology and elevating her to this same mythical status. Plath's mythology has become not only our task, but our tool.

Of the writers who have composed recent Plath "bio-fictions," Emma Tennant is perhaps the most established and also the most closely linked to Plath. Already the author of six novels and having previously penned a book, *Burnt Diaries*, informed by her (alleged) affair with Ted Hughes in the 1970s, Tennant's interest in the Plath-Hughes romance seems understandable, if not disturbingly voyeuristic. Dividing her novel among three protagonists -- Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, and Ted Hughes— and narrating their stories in the third person, Tennant maps out her characters' lives chronologically. Beginning with each narrator's childhood experiences and then culminating with Plath's suicide in 1963, the novel moves by "threes" in a converging yet linear progression: the "triad" groupings of chapters can be seen as vertical cross-sections marking significant but nonetheless parallel events as Tennant moves forward along her linear narrative timeline. The only discrepancy in this regular and tightly woven narrative structure is Tennant's ending: as the novel closes, she abandons the protagonists we have accompanied throughout *Sylvia and Ted* to adopt a outsider's view of the tragedy. Her triad structure nonetheless preserved, Tennant ends her novel symmetrically with the three

“tales” of a nurse, a secretary, and a house sitter as they recount Assia Wevill’s (fictionalized) abortion upon learning that she was pregnant with Hughes’ child at the dawn of Plath’s suicide.

Despite Tennant’s arguably “sympathetic” slant towards Hughes in her novel’s fictional recuperation of fact, one of her greatest strengths as a writer – and particularly in comparison to her bio-fictional counterparts – is her accuracy and restraint in character portrayals. Rather than writing dialogue that might (or, one could argue, inevitably) come under fire for being “untrue” or “inaccurate,” Tennant tailors the imagery she uses to describe her protagonists to mimic their writing. For example, whereas the real-life Ted Hughes concentrated on animals and nature in his best poetry, Tennant’s “Hughes” thinks in similar terms. Likewise, as the visage of a dreamed “Prince Otto” looms over “Plath’s” fictionalized narration in *Sylvia and Ted*, we are reminded of her well-known Elektra complex and her notorious preoccupation with her dead father, Otto Plath. “Prince Otto” may be an imagined fictional device, but he is nonetheless a believable one. Accordingly, by likening her characters by *metaphor* to their biographically documented tendencies, Tennant’s fiction piggybacks onto the previous “mythologies” that are part and parcel to understanding her characters. By employing the distance one can garner through symbolism and allusion, Tennant avoids “re-writing” her poets while nonetheless harkening back to their own efforts to “write” themselves.

Though Tennant borrows from pre-existing myths of Hughes and Plath in her character deposition, we should note that she avoids plundering directly from their poetry. For example, in an early chapter titled “Persephone,” Tennant describes Plath’s second suicide attempt by alluding to the famous Greek myth dramatizing the seasonal change between winter and spring – that is, she re-writes a story that Plath *has already told* in her memorable poem, “Lady Lazarus.” Later in the chapter, the conceit continues. Without obviously drawing our attention back to the story of Persephone, Tennant writes: “And later, when the River Styx flows in the hospital where Sylvia lies – only a scar on her cheek, where she had lain on the floor, visible evidence of her



failure, her latest fall from grace” (Tennant 31). Because her allusions to the Persephone myth are controlled and subtle – confined to the chapter title and a single reference to the River Styx -- Tennant likens Plath to classical mythology without obviously doing so. Instead, she borrows from the tool of myth without recycling Plath’s stunning and poetic visions of death and rebirth so characteristic of *Ariel*.

Yet although *Sylvia and Ted’s* characterization of Sylvia Plath owes its greatest debt to the language of classical mythology, in marked contrast, Tennant describes Ted Hughes through a shifting lens of “mythologies” before settling on his proclivity for the animal-inhabited, natural world. For example, when we first meet Hughes as Tennant narrates the party where the couple first met, Sylvia thinks: “There’s a sense of orgy – of Dionysus let loose – and of the flames that must consume such unlicensed behavior in puritan, post-war Cambridge: the flames of hell” (Tennant 45). Later, we move away from classical mythology and closer to the natural world as the novel allows Plath to finally discern Hughes’ “true” nature in one of its most revealing glimpses:

[She] has tried not to see this man – whose nerve endings, heartbeat, thoughts, and dreams match hers – as a killer. But she knows by now that he cannot walk across this land without the knowledge of where his next victim may lie: rook, pigeon, rabbit, hare. She has seen him lift the gun as if it’s no more than another limb, to point out to her a cairn, a fairy ring set in sphagnum moss that’s eerie emerald green. But it is a gun. (Tennant 64)

Highlighting Hughes’ fascination with “hunting” as well as his interest in the supernatural and the folk myths of the moors, Plath’s epiphany roots her husband in the natural world, anchoring him in a mythology of predators and animal “victims.”

The visceral violence of Hughes the hunter soon fades when Tennant moves from the moors to the couple’s experimentation with Oiuja in London, however, and Sylvia claims that “coincidences and correspondence are drawn as if magnetically to Ted.” Marveling at what she perceives to be his “superhuman status, conferred by the gods at birth,” Sylvia concludes, “If Ted believes this ‘mumbo jumbo’, as most of his friends consider it to be, then [she] must follow

the horoscopes, the sign charts, the I Ching too” (Tennant 68). Alluding not only to Hughes’ documented interest in the supernatural, but also perhaps to the poem “Ouija” that appears in *Birthday Letters*, Tennant illustrates the force of Hughes’ influence over Plath’s real and creative life. Ultimately, Tennant’s “Plath” distrusts Hughes’ faith in the homemade Ouija board, asking, “Does he really think his wishes will be granted if he asks ‘Pan’ or ‘Jumbo’ to fulfil them?” and wondering “why...he dwells so long on death, on message from her long-dead father, Otto” (Tennant 70). Importantly, by voicing these questions and concerns, Tennant re-enacts Plath’s first break away from Hughes and her move to a poetic style and perspective more uniquely her own.

By the time that the couple re-locates to Court Green, Tennant’s “Ted” and “Sylvia” have become completely differentiated from each other. As Ted “teaches” Sylvia poetry, for example, Tennant describes her as “laughing, amazed, as the columns or Rome bring back her words to her, in the unlikely surroundings of a suburban house” (Tennant 72). In a clever play on the Italian architectural meaning of the word “stanza,” Tennant constructs an airy “classical” mythology for Plath that differs dramatically from her narration of Hughes’ dark and supernatural meditations on death in their London flat. Transformed into a poet who has been strengthened by the “pillars” of the classics, when “Plath” learns of Hughes’s infidelity, her envious thoughts are saturated with classical mythology as she thinks:

Or does she, with the incestuous envy of a daughter of the House of Atreus, sicken and thrill at the sight of the woman she first loved – then, with the going of the father, grew to hate – without a man? Clytemnestra of the canapés and iced drinks, veiled killed who excels in the polite and professional chitchat expected of an intelligent teacher – does Sylvia actually suspect the husband she has brought here to America of having been accepted by Aurelia as a substitute for Otto? (Tennant 76)

Later imagining herself to be “a child abandoned on a hillside, Oedipus rescued, fatherless,” Tennant makes this allusion to Plath’s ties to Greek mythology and “the Oedipus complex” explicit by prophesying: “she is, only to meet at the crossing of the roads the man who is her/his father, whom she/he kills” (Tennant 83). The allusion is a clever one: in addition to

working as an expository tool for characterization, it also references Plath's relation to pop-psychology through her obsession with her father –and more broadly, Freud's Oedipal complex. As the allusion puns on "Oedipus," borrowing from both its mythological and its modern meanings, Tennant collapses classical myth, the Plath myth, and the myth of Freud in modern pop culture into a single symbol: Prince Otto, a.k.a. Oedipus. In this sense, Tennant neatly epitomizes the over-arching project of "packing" a plethora of myths into a single package: Plath.

Ironically, although Tennant previously emphasized Hughes's fascination with darkness and death in the natural world through "Plath's" narration, as Plath nears her suicidal apex, Ted slowly loses his own voice as his wife becomes our center of attention. Claiming that "Ted wishes to save her," Tennant relates, "as Creon, he must give Oedipus to Jocasta<sup>2</sup>, daughter of Laius." Once again explicitly fleshing out Sylvia's role as a "Jocasta/Aurelia" figure, significantly, it is Hughes rather than Plath who occupies this new territory of ancient Thebes (Tennant 83). Likewise, although Ted clings to the supernatural as he writes "of another birth, a rebirth and death in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, with its cycle of 49 days, its showing of a way out of the here-and-now world" (Tennant 97-98). Thinking of "love, and of the race the mythical Atalanta was not allowed to win," Hughes finally concedes that he "has thrown the first golden apple – the baby, innocent in its cot – to the running beauty, the Atalanta/Sylvia he must outstrip and conquer in the race for fame" (Tennant 98). Hughes's wild imagery of the natural world abandoned, the novel closes with classical mythology.

In one of her last narrations of Plath before reaching her hysterical, suicidal denouement, Tennant leaves us with one final allusion to seal Plath's location as a kindred "myth" to figures in classical mythology. Writing, "There is no Otto Plath...The obvious nightmares are absent," Tennant makes one final equation between Plath and myth: "a woman comes in her dreams to Sylvia. She is Procne, wife of Tereus, king of Thrace. Her story – and

her warning – it this” (Tennant 118). Thus configuring the novel as both “story and warning,” Plath simultaneously becomes poet, Procne, and prophet: she is not only the dreamer, but the dream.

In marked contrast to Emma Tennant’s voyeuristic peek into the interior life of Sylvia Plath, in writing and researching her 2003 novel, *Wintering*, Kate Moses can be said to be no less than academic. The recipient of an Everett Helm Visiting Research Fellowship at the Lilly Library of Indiana University, Moses worked with curator (and Plath expert) Karen Kukil as well as reading more than half a dozen critical works on Plath in addition to her collected manuscripts and journals. Entitling her chapters after the poem order of Plath’s final arrangement of *Ariel* (see Chapter 1), Moses focuses the majority her attention upon the rising hysteria of the final months of Plath’s life: December 12, 1962 to February 11, 1963. Yet although Plath’s suicide works as the crux for both Tennant’s and Moses’ narratives, Moses is as determinedly non-linear as Tennant is chronological: whereas Tennant narrates Plath’s entire life in its linear order, Moses’ novel narrates only a single week while showing it become subsumed – or perhaps more fittingly *consumed* – by memories. Avoiding speculation as to the little known details of Plath’s childhood, Moses concentrates on her marriage to Ted Hughes, their residency and failing relationship at Court Green, flitting back and forth through time with Plath’s final stay at 23 Fitzroy Rd., the place of her death.

Despite Moses’ painstaking attention to Plath literature and lore, her novel nonetheless represents an imaginative innovation. Contradicting much of what we read about Plath in her biographies, Moses concentrates in *Wintering* on the terrifying demands of motherhood rather than obsessing over the “father figure” as many Plath critics and biographers tend to do. Linking Plath’s struggles as a single mother caring for two small children to her relationship to her overbearing mother, Aurelia Plath, Moses makes “single motherhood” the monstrous villain of her novel as Plath slowly unravels in a cold apartment, desperate to support her two sick and

wailing infants. While Gilbert asks, “Why would anyone as smart and learned as Moses want to write this kind of thing, especially when she obviously understands how dazzlingly Sylvia Plath said it all for herself, in her own inimitable words?” Moses’ own reading of *Ariel* seems to make her imaginative impulse clear. Whereas most readers are dazzled by the Oedipal politics of Plath’s infamous poem, “Daddy” – forever shaping their opinion of the poet as the archetypal “man-eater” – Moses sees her in a different light. Not only is Plath a bearer of death in *Wintering*; for Moses, she is more importantly a mother, a source of life.

While Moses’ most imaginative contribution to the Plath myth stands is her positive revival of Plath as a mother figure – (despite the horror of Plath’s position as a single mother, Moses’ depicts Plath’s genuine affection for her children as laudable) – we should take note when mythical allusions suddenly emerge as *Wintering* nears its apex: Plath’s inevitable suicide. Notably, *Wintering* remains void of classical allusions until more than halfway through the novel: it is only when Plath “erupts from the Underground at Piccadilly Circus” that Moses broaches the world of mythology by likening her to “Eros, child of Chaos, directing six-way traffic on one bronze foot” (Moses 164). In one of our rare glimpses of Plath alone – momentarily freed from the responsibility of caring for her children – like Plath, we erupt from the real-world into a brilliant kaleidoscope: the world of myth.

Soon after Plath’s brief romp at Piccadilly Circus, the novel becomes increasingly claustrophobic as she laments her lost freedom and the stress of providing for her two children. Moving into an extended allusion to the myth of Arachne, a skilled weaver who committed suicide after offending Athena in a weaving contest who was later revived (in Ovid) as a spider, Moses narrates: “From her husband’s bed, from her father’s, a woman discovers how she has been betrayed. And still she longs for the light, and the parting of the whispering crowd, and the face of god emerging through the dark door. For *her*” (Moses 171). For not only is Moses’ Plath

unraveling; she is weighted by the mythical burden of the torment of the betrayed. As the conceit continues, Moses concludes:

“Sylvia is hanging, hanging by a thread. Like Arachne stripped to her waist, dangling, her forehead and shoulders gleaming with sweat, the purples bruise rising at her temple, and gray-eyed Athena breathing hard beside her, gripping her by the hair—sometimes one is so defenseless—tipping her vial of wolfbane and yew into the dying girl’s braided crown, whispering into her ear, *Seek all the fame you will among mortal men, but yield place to the goddess.*” (Moses 171)

The question remains, however, whether we are to see Plath as a character that is literally “like” Arachne, or as a figure that tragedy has ceded the notoriety and memorability of myth. Seemingly, we can understand a happy Plath without the resource of mythology, but we cannot understand her “tragic” dimensions without alluding to stories of the past.

Despite the impending sense of doom that saturates the novel as we near its conclusion, Moses takes a final stab at optimism by likening Plath to a less tragic heroine: April, the daughter of Demeter. Although Plath “has never borne the cold and the dark well,” Moses claims that “like Demeter’s daughter, April is when Sylvia comes back to life.” Displaying her extensive knowledge of Plath scholarship, Moses writes: “April, indeed, was the month she let Ted wash over her like a baptism six years ago; April the month of both her parents’ births. Even Frieda had the good sense to arrive five days late, on April Fool’s.” Prophesying a “springtime resurrection,” Moses’ Plath even verges on hope as she imagines, “this thirtieth year is coming in the sanctity of her study, in the ease she is finding there again” (Moses 196). In an adaptation of mythical allusion as optimistic as her own transformation of Plath from the tragic woman into a mother, Moses’ adaptation of April posits a more positive outcome than the one that (we already know) must inevitably unfold.

Surely enough, Moses’ final allusion to myth represents something darker: something “real: sharp as sudden pain.” Plath’s stories become “Not history but bodies piled where they fell in a mountain pass, bleeding still; not bodies piled in a mountain pass but her life, the wreckage and the spoils spread before her, the essential battle over” as “the truths [fan] out a

page at a time” (Moses 234). Rejecting the potential solace of myth, Moses understands her story as “No Greek drama but a life, a woman’s life, her own, and her marriage the real and bloody sacrifice” (Moses 234). With resignation, Moses recalls the Spartans brutal defeat at Thermopylae; our hopes crushed, we move slowly to the surreal and sad ending of the novel (Moses 235).

Published in the spring of 2005, Robert Anderson’s novel *Little Fugue* not only embodies the tropes of the archetypal “Plath bio-fiction,” but also the more generalized tropes of contemporary fiction in the past decade. Following in the footsteps of novels such as Michael Cunningham’s bestseller, *The Hours*, Anderson’s novel divides its story into the tales of four temporally divided narrators whose lives reverberate with the contributions of an iconic female literary legend<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to Tennant’s technique of narrating from the third-person perspective in a nonetheless linear plot, Anderson’s technique is decidedly post-modern: his three “speakers” are (predictably enough) Ted Hughes, Assia Wevill and Sylvia Plath, but in a bizarre twist, our fourth narrator is a figure named “Robert” who speaks to us in the first person, a man coming to age in New York City in the 1960s and 70s. Quite simply, “Robert’s” tenuous connection to the other narrators and plots is his adolescent discovery and “love” for Plath. While Anderson’s title explicitly refers to a poem by Plath of the same name, Plath dies remarkably early in the novel, disappearing before we are even halfway complete.

In its most positive light, Anderson’s novel is a story of “fading echoes:” although three of these four narrative strands focus on the infamous love triangle between Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Assia Wevill, its greatest interest seems to be borrowing from the legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> As Michael Schaub bluntly puts it, “The fourth point of view belongs to a character named Robert Anderson, which seems to prove that the author-as-character conceit in contemporary literature isn’t going away soon.”

Plath to make sense of modern America, 1960-2001. As Regina Marler observes in her review of *Little Fugue* for *The New York Observer*:

“It’s true that the profound lyrical appeal of Sylvia Plath’s suicide at 30 – the final drafts of her blistering new poems typed and on her desk – goes a long way toward explaining why she and not another of the brilliant women writers and betrayed wives of the postwar period became an icon of modern female wrath. Death was Plath’s own great theme, both personally and artistically: a correspondence too rich not to lift her pitiable, vengeful exit to the level of poetry, so that her life – especially in its last months, during the breakup of her marriage – forms a unity with her art” (Marler)

Mythology nonetheless exercises an important influence upon the book: it pervades Anderson’s narration of sexual and romantic encounters, drawing from the stories of Ovid, Ariadne, Myrrha, Olympus, Pandora, and many more. Anderson’s novel lusts after Ted and Sylvia, even going so far as to imagine multiple masturbatory episodes and sex scenes between various characters. Even these sexual behaviors must be seen through the lens of mythology, however, proving the sustained importance of myth and myth-making to the legacy of fictionalizing Plath.

Although Tennant and Moses vary in the degree to which they connect Plath to myth, the manner in which they depict these connections is decidedly subtler than Anderson’s. Early in the novel, after moving quickly through a venomous and disconcerting diatribe from “Robert” voicing his hatred of Hughes, Anderson makes the connection between “Plath” and “myth” explicit by not only comparing Plath to Ovid’s Myrrha, but making obvious note of “Plath’s” own interest in this myth. Anderson writes:

“She searched the text of *Metamorphoses* for an auxiliary identity. Ovid’s Princess Myrrha loved her cold father King Cinyras beyond station and shame, while he raised her in disinterest, sooner sharing his kingdom than his humanity. A dutiful daughter, she tried suicide. The underworld, not systematized until medieval times, was unsure how to classify her and did not view itself as a suitable intermediary in what was obviously a family quarrel. They turned Myrrha from their gates. Thus, in her mind, both heaven and hell spurned her. Her dignity, it was now evident, had been a casualty of her birth. Death was not a solution, but only the final complication of the problem...Myrrha, to Sylvia, was a true artist in that she understood the redemptive power of



degradation; the sureness of bringing oneself low in order to rise above. In the end, she ingeniously metamorphoses herself into a fruit-bearing medium.” (Anderson 13)

Clearly, Anderson’s use of the Myrrha myth is a fictional innovation, as is his “reading” of Plath’s belief in “the redemptive power of degradation.” Nonetheless, later in the novel as Plath works to compose *Ariel* in the aftermath of her break-up with Hughes, Anderson continues the conceit by “[triggering] a Grecian lightbulb” and “a memory of Myrrha,” as he relates, “Sylvia saw stars and the checkerboard map of a banquet cloth, which reminded her that, what with the new poems, she had been feasting on despair for months” (Anderson 42). Anderson’s use of “myth” provides us with a tool to “read” Plath’s poetry as well as a referent of comparison. Whereas Tennant and Moses more subtly use allusion to bridge the gap of fictionally characterizing a real person, Anderson makes explicit the relation not only between “myth” and Plath, but also “myth” and the meta-textual process of reading.

While Anderson’s novel takes greater account of pop culture and its fascination with Plath, it also undeniably contains a far greater emphasis on sexuality – an emphasis that it explains via myth. For example, when Anderson imagines a strange masturbatory episode as Plath “turns atop the stone bust on the marble table, fitting the idol for a new hat with alternately the split of her sex and the split of her anus” (Anderson 60), we are unavoidably confronted with Oedipal politics when Anderson tells us that, in this masturbatory act, she is imagining her father. Further in the novel, Plath speculates that “a mythical parent can prove much more sustaining than an actual one” as Anderson narrates: “her posthumous relationship with her father has gotten Sylvia this far” despite noting that this was “terribly unfair to Ted” for “allowing him to marry a woman with one heart in the grave” (Anderson 89). Ultimately, Anderson encourages us to see this hyper-sexualized relationship between Plath and her imagined father as a myth dictating her suicide and corresponding failure as a mother to her

children. Expressing a belief that the ancient Greeks were “elegiacally obsessed” with “the leave-taking of death” as well as “awestruck veneration of the hallowed coffers of both the human mind and the human womb, in all their diverse potentialities” (Anderson 66), Anderson likens Plath’s obsession with her father and the past to that of Orpheus and the bride of Lot: “turning back only to tune in a lethal void” (Anderson 89).

In contrast to Plath’s inward-turned sexuality, when Anderson envisions a torrid affair between Wevill and Hughes as their desires spill – as if uncontrollably – into a public venue, quite fittingly their lovemaking takes places in the classical galleries of an art museum. As Ted accompanies Assia through the (apparently abandoned) Greek and Roman exhibits, the couple performs a striptease through the museum while viewing its artifacts (Anderson 58). In a strange moment after their intercourse has taken place and the couple has hurriedly re-clothed themselves, Ted peruses an etching and comes to a strange epiphany:

“The figure in the drawing was not Autumn at all, as he had thought. It was Ariadne, daughter of Minos, who provided Theseus with the length of thread that left him out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth. He repaid her by abandoning her on the isle of Naxos, where Aphrodite promised her an immortal lover to replace the mortal one she had lost.” (Anderson 40)

Later, Anderson returns to this allusion when he entitles his third chapter, “Ariadne’s Claw.”

Although subtlety is surely not one of Anderson’s fortes as a writer, the returning impact of this myth seems one of these rare moments as Anderson likens Plath’s imagined relationship with her father to the “immortal lover” promised by Aphrodite (or perhaps, Wevill’s imagined relationship with the dead Plath as her affair with Hughes fails) through the simple act of substitution.

This idea of “substitution” is perhaps the best way to understand Anderson’s use of myth and allusion in *Little Fugue*. For Tennant and for Moses, Plath’s relation to mythical characters is something akin to “simile:” she is *like*, but she is not “is.” For Anderson, however, interactions between characters, both with each other as well as with myths, seem to imply the

opposite: that characters can be substituted for one another, or that they *want* to be. This perhaps is the logic underlying his insertion of the “Robert” character into the novel – if Plath can be Myrrha and Wevill can be Ariadne, then of course Robert can be something “akin” to the writers that he looks up to, just as they become embodied as myths within his novel. In this regard, one particularly strange conversation between Hughes and Wevill seems particularly illuminating. Wevill tells Hughes (upon learning that she is pregnant), “I only want to have your child,” and Hughes replies “You want to have my child and you want to kill my wife.” The logic of substituting characters not only for one another, but for their mythical and symbolic values, is epitomized in Wevill’s response: “she grinds out her cigarette, leaving a black, smoking eyelet in the wood of the bench” and says, “I don’t want to kill her, Ted. I want to be her” (Anderson 87).

Although this rationale of substituting characters for one another seems reminiscent of myth’s function – i.e., providing a symbol with a naturalized and immediate “meaning” -- Anderson’s novel concludes with a sense of disconnect rather than the sense catharsis that we often gain from myths themselves. Much like Hughes’ lament earlier in the novel, the wide variety of mythical allusions appearing in *Little Fugue* ring hollow:

“He feels as though he has never really known Sylvia. The offshoots and ancillaries of her, sure. The molten essence of her, if there is such a substance, never. She has always been a thousand different variations on a missing central theme.” (Anderson 76)

In a meditation on this same sentiment of loss and lack, Anderson comments later that Hughes avoided the matter of man’s role in his own mortality by “simple omission.” Claiming that Plath “held back on the punch line,” Anderson describes “the joke” as “Sibylline;” “*She had left [Hughes] to live his life weighing out which of them had been born to kill the other*” (Anderson 183). In contrast to “Robert’s” contention, then – the belief that “I know for certain that there can be no poetry without the battle royal of conflicting passions and desires” (Anderson 338) – *Little Fugue* ultimately seems less than epic and far more like burlesque. We might return to the absurd yet

nonetheless resonant question of the novel's pornographic interest to a moment when Wevill asks Hughes (in reference to the etching of Ariadne), "But what is she doing nearly naked?" Anderson concludes, as we should: "Ted thought about it. 'I don't know'" (Anderson 40).

Pithy in his understanding of the Plath "bio-fiction," when Michael Schaub wrote his review of Robert Anderson's *Little Fugue*, he framed it within the context of Plath's most famous poem, "Daddy." Noting that although Sylvia Plath may have been many things – but that amongst them she was hardly "ambiguous" in expressing herself – Schaub observes, "Plath may not have been subtle, but she was concise. Poets almost always are" (Schaub). Arguing that Plath's economic use of language is a lesson that Robert Anderson might have profited from in writing his novel, Schaub closes his review with this stinging parting shot: "There is promise in *Little Fugue*, but it's difficult to tell why Anderson needed almost 400 pages to write what could have been boiled down to "Ted, Ted, you bastard, I'm through" (Schaub).

In understanding this latest wave in the Plath myth, in reading these bio-fictions as an effort to understand the way in which culture embeds new myth into myths much older, (i.e. Plath into pop culture into classical myth), it seems that we must confront this same aesthetic concern that Schaub voices in his criticism of Anderson. It seems somewhat ironic that although Emma Tennant, Kate Moses, and Robert Anderson have undeniably spent a great deal of time thinking about Plath – both in their morbid interested in her death and life, but also presumably first inspired *by* her work – these "bio-fictions" fail to understand that no matter how many allusions they invoke, no matter how imaginatively they re-envision Plath, with control and concision, Plath herself said it better. If we are to see Plath's "confessional poetry" as an act of self-monumentalization; if we are to see Plath's poetry as the first contributor to the "Plath myth," myth's inability to successfully *recreate* Plath, to naturalize and flatten her into a single, reassuring symbol seems to be the kink that we cannot smooth out in "re-writing the Plath

myth.” Why is the process of re-writing “Plath” a never more popular pastime? Why have previous efforts to re-write this myth been ineffective?

Perhaps we are to best understand the implications of the changing trajectory of the “Plath myth” if we are to return to where we started: with Barthes, and his ideas of “mythology.” As Barthes states, “If one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society ...it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essential function” (Barthes \_). Instead, he describes “myth” as a normalizing force that is utterly lacking in depth; like Plath’s poetry, “myth acts economically” by abolishing the complexity of human acts and giving them the simplicity of essences. In the world of myth, understanding lives in a state of “blissful clarity” as “things appear to mean something by themselves.”

The Plath bio-fiction indicates that even in this new age of information, our new and increased knowledge of Plath, we cannot understand her without hearing the visceral cry of her poetry – a cry that invokes mythology, and thus a system of signifying as economic as poetry itself. By using mythological allusions as a crutch, the Plath “bio-fiction” attempts to garner this same level of “clarity” as Plath did – but the re-writing process continues and continues. Perhaps the “Plath myth” is Promethean; perhaps its task will never be achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> As explained in my introduction, Plath “bio-fictions” are fictionalized accounts that engage in the act of interpreting factual information about Sylvia Plath while simultaneously borrowing from creative license to imagine her psychic and emotional life in fiction.

<sup>2</sup> Jocasta was the mother of Oedipus who committed suicide after learning that she had married her own son.

**Abbreviations (as cited within text):**

*Ariel* Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1965.

*Ariel Restored* Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004.

*Johnny Panic* Plath, Sylvia. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1977.

*Journals* Plath, Sylvia. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York, New York: Random House, Inc., 1982.

*Unabridged Journals* Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York, New York: Anchor, 2000.

*Letters* Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. New York, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1975.

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